

Personal response and social responsibility: Responses of middle school students to multicultural literature

Samples of writing that 123 eighth-grade students produced during a multicultural literature unit were studied to identify what that writing revealed about their perceptions of characters and people from cultures different from their own. Although the readers involved were primarily white, the differences discussed have more to do with power than with color.

Cassidy and Cassidy (2003/2004) reported that, although the topic of multicultural literature was hotter for 2004 than it was for 2003, over 75% of the literacy leaders interviewed indicated that it should be receiving more attention than it does. As a component of multicultural education, multicultural literature is often considered a powerful instructional tool for helping students develop understanding and respect for people of cultures different from their own as well as gain an appreciation of their own heritage. Acknowledging the importance of multicultural literature, Bishop (1997) noted, however, that the *assumption* has been that reading and responding to literature about people from nondominant groups would help readers from dominant cultures to value—and maybe even celebrate—diversity as a natural aspect of society. She pointed out that much of the recent professional writing about multicultural literature and its role in the classroom has

focused less on effective instructional strategies than on goals of making underrepresented groups visible and countering stereotypes.

What follows is the analysis and discussion of writing done by 123 middle school students in response to multicultural novels. The purpose of this article is to describe the instructional goals and strategies employed by the teacher and to determine what the students learned from the books they read as they participated in a carefully designed multicultural literature unit. The findings shed light on what happens when dominant-culture children read literature by or about people of cultures different from their own (Dressel, 2003) and offer important insights for teachers thinking about their own teaching.

Reading and culture

Most readers read literature aesthetically—for the human experience reflected in it (Rosenblatt, 1938/1976). Researchers have found that readers who become personally involved in the story also obtain a higher level of understanding than students who read efferently, or primarily to recall, paraphrase, or analyze (Cox & Many, 1992; Rosenblatt, 1976). As readers mature and learn more about literature, they become better able to view texts as possible realities and to understand them in terms of the text world rather than the real world as they know it (Applebee, 1978; Galda, 1992).

There are, however, clear cultural differences in the way students respond to literature. While Rosenblatt's (1938/1976; 1985) influential theory

of reader response calls for an emphasis on the personal literary transaction as an absolutely indispensable starting point, she is clear that readers subsequently must reflect on and examine their responses to and interpretations of the text in order for the richness of their experiences with literature to grow. She noted that the reader's past experiences, together with the purpose of the reading and the socially situated circumstances in which the reading is done, all have an effect. Purves, Foshay, and Hansson (1973), after examining literature instruction in 10 different countries, discovered that readers do, indeed, reflect the differing critical traditions and teaching emphases to which they are exposed. In the United States, this conditioning is already pronounced by the end of junior high and in high school.

While neither the culture of the author nor the culture of the reader interferes with aesthetic response (Altieri, 1996), cultural knowledge does influence students' understanding and interpretation of texts (Reynolds, Taylor, Steffensen, Shirey, & Anderson, 1982; Steffensen, Joag-Dev, & Anderson, 1979). Drawing on 10 years of research with adolescents in 10 different U.S. communities, Francis Ianni (as cited in Beach & Freedman, 1992) noted that peer group attitudes and values reflect the attitudes of the local community. Students tend to hold tightly to attitudes reflective of their own cultural groups (Graham, 1985; Heath, 1983). And, as Graham noted,

rather than adapting to their changing world and environment to realize "a new perception of things," students seem to react on presuppositions inherited from their parents and their culture, presuppositions that may be based on intolerance, resistance to change, and hostility. (p. 1)

While teachers and students often lack clarity about what culture is and also must deal with much cultural misunderstanding and misinformation (Jordan, 1997), teachers who use multicultural literature report that their students responded to such literature just as they do to other literature (Ostrowski, 1997). Students are most interested in whether they can relate to the literature and are little interested in the cultural issues. Jordan found that they read out of their own experience, knowledge, and understanding or misunderstanding, personalizing their responses and identifying with the

characters. Students often supply information either consciously or unconsciously in order to understand a text about cultures different from their own. Rather than helping, though, this process interferes with students' ability to read texts from other cultures. Because students have limited knowledge of others, they often fail to see the intersection between the story world and their schema for understanding the culture. Even learning that the text is from a different culture has little impact on student reading. Instead, they attempt to incorporate what they read into their own view of the world. As Purves (1993) pointed out, after years of reading basals or participating in whole-language classrooms, students are not naive readers. By the early to middle elementary grades, students already know many of the stereotypes that are a part of literature and of cultural literacy and are, thus, conditioned to read in particular ways.

Jordan (1997) reported that students often dislike texts they do not understand, but after discussing the texts and being given enough information about the culture for the texts to make sense, they often change their opinion. Asking students to pay attention to things in a text that they don't understand often requires them to make a major shift in how they read. However, if they don't pay attention to what they don't understand, they are not able to ask for information that would help them understand a text or the culture reflected in that text. As a consequence, students think they have heard another voice, but it is only their own voice replayed. Yet even teachers who do include multicultural literature in their classrooms are often unable to provide readers with information about specific cultures. Even so, Jordan argued, "unless some attempt is made to give students some factual information about the background culture of texts, then the cycle of one voice, rejection of unknown voices, could continue" (p. 17), defeating one of the main purposes for using multicultural literature—that of coming to grips with different viewpoints.

Teachers and literature

Many and Wiseman (1992) found that a teacher's approach to teaching literature profoundly affected the written responses of both elementary

and preservice teachers' to literature. Students in classrooms guided by an efferent approach, in which readers focused primarily on retaining what they read, responded in ways that were more detached from the stories and hesitated to give their personal opinions, preferring instead to analyze the works using literary criteria. Students in classrooms guided by an aesthetic approach, where readers read first for the lived-through experience of the literature, were more likely to give personal reactions to the unfolding events and were much less likely to treat the text as an object to be analyzed.

Although students' preferences for ways of interpreting literature are affected by the way teachers teach (Rogers, 1991), students' reading of texts may be quite different from the readings of their teachers (Wason-Ellam, 1997). Readers don't merely absorb the values of a story, even if those values are of ultimate advantage to them. When ideas offered in a text conflict with an entrenched worldview, readers often reveal intense struggles to either reshape or reject the text material. Rather than directing students toward a single approved reading, teachers need to engage them in discussions designed to encourage an examination of assumptions, inconsistencies, or illogical conclusions that might otherwise remain unchallenged (Graham, 1985).

Enciso (1997) argued that teachers also need to learn how to encourage students to explore their own and their peers' ideas about difference and to recognize and question the images and the ideologies that appear in literature. She posited,

if we choose *not* to explore these questions [relating to audience and sociohistorical attitudes and practices] with children...all of the negotiations of the meaning of difference will be left to those children whose cultural references and perspectives are most understood and valued within the classroom. (p. 38)

Yet Naidoo (1992) pointed out that the role of the teacher is a difficult one. If students aren't challenged to question, there is no need to change. However, unless the climate is trusting and supportive, students often become defensive. To help create such a climate, she argued that teachers must be colearners. They must live out the qualities of trust, respect, equality, and interdependence in their interactions with students because their actions are an integral part of the classroom curriculum.

Response to literature involves not only empathizing with characters and connecting the story with one's own experience and position in the real world, but it also involves constructing alternative versions of reality and self. To construct such alternatives, readers must be aware of how their own ideology shapes their response to texts. But Beach (1997) found that students who benefit from systems that confer power and privilege on the basis of race tend to be unaware of these advantages because the dominant-culture perspective is so often presented as the norm.

Even with significant background and preparation for their reading, students' cultural attitudes and expectations can interfere with their recognition of the "full meaning and significance of the text" (Tobin, 1989, p. 326). On the basis of findings from her study of white, upper-middle-class Australian adolescents, Tobin concluded that readers first need an opportunity to respond privately to a text; then an opportunity to share reactions and interpretations within small, supportive peer groups; and finally, an opportunity to share with the entire classroom as a community of readers. Given the failure of the students in her study to use their existing knowledge, Tobin also concluded that teachers need to help students integrate their learning across curricular areas. They need to intentionally connect new experiences, such as reading a new novel, with prior experiences such as school-based learning and media exposure. She noted, "the superficiality of the school learning of many White students is exacerbated by the lack of real life experience, that limits the application of school-based knowledge beyond the curriculum" (p. 320). She encouraged teachers to arrange cultural experiences that reflect alternative perspectives in order to break down racial stereotypes, as well as to enable readers to better recognize the "invisible" culture when they meet it in literature.

Describing what he calls families of social practices necessary for critical literacy, Luke (2000) wrote that students need to develop the critical abilities necessary to appraise the ideological stance of a variety of texts, including literary texts, at the same time that they work toward facility in understanding codes, meaning, and pragmatics (for concrete classroom examples, see Vasquez, 2003). That is, readers need to develop the skills to determine how books make differences visible or

invisible, how they position readers in relation to differences, what kinds of writers write what kinds of texts, whose interests are paramount, what any particular text is trying to do to its readers, and which voices are silent or absent (Luke, 2000). Luke maintained that texts are never neutral; they position readers in relation to a particular worldview. They are always situated in social contexts involving systems of meaning and power that affect people. Luke (2003) argued that teachers need to engage children with the cultural and economic globalization characterized by the seamless flow in “texts, images, information, data, signs, and symbols” rather than solely with aesthetic purposes of escape or disengagement or limited local experiences that fail to connect the local with “other possible worlds, times, and places” (p. 21).

Beverley Naidoo grew up white and middle class in South Africa during the period of apartheid. She is a product of a system which limited her experience with texts, and she remembered becoming intensely angry at the narrowness of her schooling and at “its complicity in perpetuating apartheid through not challenging” what she called her “blinkered vision” (1992, p. 9). The well-known author of several young adult novels, including *Journey to Jo’burg* (1986), *The Other Side of Truth* (2001), and *Out of Bounds* (2003), she experienced firsthand the consequences of powerful systems when two of her books were banned in South Africa. Eventually she emigrated to England, where she conducted her doctoral research in a predominantly white area of that country. When asked why she chose to work with white students, she explained that it is the learning community within schools—teachers, parents, and students—that is most often responsible for perpetuating racism, and they do so by not talking about things (i.e., through a structured absence).

Naidoo spent a year reading and discussing literature with a class of dominant-culture students (affluent, white 11- to 16-year-olds). Using a variety of reader-response strategies and literature “written from a perspective strongly indicting racism,” she “investigate[d] the potential for certain works of literature...to extend white students’ empathies; to challenge ethnocentric and racist assumptions and concepts; and to develop critical thinking about the nature of our society” (1992, p. 21). She found that, overall, the students liked the books they read, but she

also found clear limits to empathy. Many of the students, particularly boys, who expressed empathy with characters who were targets of racism were also willing to exonerate the perpetrators. Even when readers empathized with characters they perceived as “other,” the literature was not enough by itself to affect the boundaries of “otherness” except “for those in some way already open and ready to hear” (p. 138). Instead, readers were more likely to respond by “re-fencing” (Allport, 1958)—designating the event (or story, in this case) as an exception or an anomaly, thus permitting readers to preserve their original mental constructs. Students demonstrated strong feelings against racism both before and after the course, but their concept of racism remained limited to personal attitudes, behaviors, and relationships and did not extend to systematic patterns within social structures. Naidoo found that students were willing to see racism as something “out there,” but it was much more difficult and quite disturbing for students to see racism in themselves or their immediate groups, because adolescents are just beginning to develop an understanding of the social and historical context of which they are a part. Even in instances where students moved beyond empathy to some kind of reconstruction of their frames of reference, Naidoo doubted that the changes were sufficient to affect the students’ everyday lives. She concluded that “in addressing racism with white students, one is challenging them not only to extend their range of empathy but to question their frames of reference and thus elements of their own identities” (1992, p. 146).

The study

I analyzed the writing of 123 eighth graders during a multicultural literature unit. Ann (a pseudonym), the teacher, had three primary goals for her students during the multicultural unit:

- The students will enjoy reading and understanding their multicultural novels.
- The students will learn about the norms and values of a culture different from their own.
- The students will understand themselves and their cultural norms and values more clearly.

Ann felt a strong sense of responsibility toward her students and her teaching. As a result, she planned carefully and thoroughly. She wrote in her journal,

Without [clear and specific outcomes], there is no focus and little sense of accomplishment at the end of the unit for the teacher or for the students. The outcomes create the frame for the unit, and all the thousands of decisions you must make fall into place much more easily with that frame.

Ann collected all of the written work completed by the students, with the exception of two assignments not directly related to the multicultural unit: a yearlong journal and a project in which students were to “create a character.” She also kept a journal throughout the unit and shared that with me.

The setting and the participants

The middle school in which the study was conducted was located in a suburb about 10 miles from a major midwestern city in the United States. It had approximately 200 students in each grade, six through eight, for a total of nearly 600 students. In the journal she kept throughout the unit, Ann noted that the student population was “over 95% white, with a fairly middle-class SES [socioeconomic status], although there is a sizeable portion of lower SES families and students in the district.” Math was tracked but other classes were not; classes met daily for 50 minutes. Ann explained, “there is a very wide range of students within one class, from special education students, who have difficulty writing a sentence, to the likely candidates for valedictorian who breeze through the most difficult assignments.” Ann was the English teacher for four classes of 32, 27, 31, and 33 students. In these classes, 93% of the students were white, U.S. citizens; 7% were nonwhite or noncitizens; 51% were female; and 49% were male.

Ann graduated with a bachelor’s degree in English and a master’s degree in education and subsequently accepted a position in the middle school where this study took place. Ann was a well-respected teacher. She worked to see that her students were academically challenged and required to think critically.

Ann described the unit, the literature selection, and the assignments in her journal. She planned her teaching in four- to five-week units. The multicultural

literature unit developed because she knew that her students needed more exposure to and experience with multicultural texts. The multicultural unit was the fifth of eight units this particular year and was taught from February 6 to March 17 (with a week in the middle for spring break). Ann felt that placing it at the beginning of the third quarter would ensure that students had the needed background to support success. By this time, they had read a selection of short stories and two novels; written a research paper, a book about themselves, a fable, and a literary essay; made four class presentations (a skit, information report, personal anecdote, and character analysis); and written weekly in a personal journal to which Ann responded. They had defined and discussed plot, character, mood, setting, tone, point of view, theme, conflict, foreshadowing, flashback, and turning point. To help students even more, Ann provided them with a unit calendar and planned a variety of daily activities.

The literature and its selection

According to Ann, she involved her students in selecting the novels to be read. First, she selected 10 potential novels. Ann explained in her journal,

I considered the following carefully: appeal/interest level (including gender of the protagonist); ability level (high/middle/low); variety in cultures; and authenticity of the author. Unfortunately, I had to consider cost—so I had to have books available in paperback, which eliminated several excellent choices. I looked at lists of recommended multicultural novels recommended for this age level, spoke to [the author], a university professor who taught multicultural literature, and read 10 books and parts of 5 others.

Ann defined multicultural literature as that which reflected a power differential between groups created by such things as ethnicity, race, gender, or economics. She included novels set in the present and the past, some set in the United States—including characters who were U.S. citizens and those who were not—and some set in countries other than the United States.

After she ranked the books, Ann ordered the top six (Table 1) and, at the request of the special education department, she purchased *Morning Girl* for her special education students. Every student was assigned to read one of their top three titles. Groups were heterogeneous, and most were gender

balanced, although a few were all male or all female because of the students' choices of novels.

The unit assignments

During the unit, the students completed a variety of assignments. Before beginning the unit, the students completed a short-answer survey to find out how they felt about reading new novels, about reading novels whose characters had a different background and history from their own, about the positive and negative things they knew about different groups of people, and about where they had learned what they knew. This survey was repeated at the end of the unit but with two changes: students were asked how they felt about reading their specific novel rather than new novels in general, and they were asked whether they would choose to read another novel whose characters had a different background and history from their own.

In each class, students reading the same novel worked together on their Book Club Organizers, which Ann designed “to give students a place to keep track of their novel and to give some shape to their club’s discussion time and to help students gain more practice and expertise with literary elements.” Using their Organizers, students later prepared an oral group project to communicate to others in the class what they learned from reading their book. They were not to retell the story but were to focus on conflicts, culture, characters, symbols, or themes and had a variety of presentation formats from which to choose: newspaper, children’s book, book of poetry, comic strip, television talk show, news broadcast, museum exhibit, or puppet show. Ideally, the presentations were to function as a way for the students to learn something about all of the cultures that the novels represented.

For the Dialogue Journal, students worked with partners. Partners read different books so that they would learn about two cultures different from their own. In her journal, Ann noted that a second purpose of the Dialogue Journal was to “to make the students take on the point of view of one of the characters in their novel, to try to see the world from a different cultural perspective.” The entries took the form of letters. Students wrote letters using the voice of a character in their novels and

TABLE 1 Novels read during the unit
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• <i>Waiting for the Rain: A Novel of South Africa</i> by Sheila Gordon (1987, Orchard).• <i>Finding My Voice</i> by Marie G. Lee (1982, Houghton Mifflin).• <i>Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind</i> by Suzanne Fisher Staples (1989, Knopf).• <i>Journey of the Sparrows</i> by Fran Leeper Buss with Daisy Cubias (1991, Lodestar).• <i>Scorpions</i> by Walter Dean Myers (1993, Harcourt).• <i>Shadow of the Dragon</i> by Sherry Garland (1993, Harcourt).• <i>Morning Girl</i> by Michael Dorris (1992, Hyperion).
<i>Note.</i> <i>Morning Girl</i> was used at the request of the head of the Special Education Department. The other six were selected by Ann's students.

responded to their partner’s letters in their own voices.

The analysis

Because this was not an experimental study, students were not randomly selected and there was no attempt to implement procedures or methods other than those Ann used in her normal teaching. To determine whether Ann’s students achieved the three goals she had established for the unit, I examined the pre- and postunit surveys on attitudes and knowledge, the Book Club Organizer (BCO), and the Dialogue Journal (DJ). In addition, I looked for evidence of the following behaviors, which Ann anticipated would contribute to students’ failure to achieve her goals:

- Did the students create generalizations about all members of a cultural group based on the portrayal of that group in their novels?
- Did the students accept the presentation of a cultural group without questioning the novels or the authors?
- Did the students judge characters from non-dominant groups using dominant (European American) cultural standards?

- Did the students ignore or not recognize the effect that being a member of a nondominant culture had on the lives of the characters?
- Did the students see the characters from nondominant groups as victims rather than as people with a whole range of human experience?

Assignments from Ann's third-period class were used to develop an evaluation instrument, to create a rubric for evaluating the remaining papers, and for use in training two independent evaluators—myself and a second person. The remaining 91 sets of papers were coded to maintain the anonymity of the students and then evaluated by the two readers. Each set of student papers contained 20 to 25 pages of handwritten material, and scoring took approximately an hour per student. Although they scored totally independently, evaluators' scores on all items were very similar. (Interrater reliability for all items was statistically significant and ranged from .7 to 1.0 except for two items where the reliabilities were .53 and .63, respectively.)

Results

Students liked the multicultural novels. Although they were not directly asked if they liked their books, there was no indication in the assignments of 94% that they didn't like their novels. In fact, after the unit, students felt really good about reading the books, whereas many had felt negatively about reading novels before the unit.

Personal response

Before beginning the unit, students were asked, "How do you usually feel about reading a new novel?" On the postunit survey, students were asked, "How did you feel about reading this novel?" The students felt much more positively about reading multicultural books after reading one (83% as opposed to 41%; see Figure 1). How the students' attitudes changed is also interesting. Before the unit, 21 students indicated that they didn't like to read, had trouble reading, or didn't like to read school-assigned material. But after the unit, 13 of those 21 students felt positively about reading their books and *none of them* mentioned they didn't like to read, had trouble reading, or didn't like to read school-assigned material. Overall, there was clear-

ly a move from negative or neutral feelings about reading novels to positive feelings about reading the novels used in the unit.

Students' Dialogue Journals indicated that students became personally involved in the stories. Not only did readers like their books, but 93% of Ann's students also clearly lived inside the story. They had an experience in virtual reality—what Rosenblatt (1985) called an "aesthetic transaction." For example, after reading *Shabanu: Daughter of the Wind*, Tonja wrote, "My family raises camels. Pretty soon we will be leaving for Sibi when we get there our camels will be looked at and some will be bought. I love taking care of the camels." Jason provides another example. He wrote the following after reading *Shadow of the Dragon*: "My family is just horrible. Ba, my grandmother, had a huge fight with Kim, my punkish sister. They were fighting because Kim was wearing really short skirts. I had to settle it since I'm the anh-hai or oldest son. Now Ba and Kim hate me."

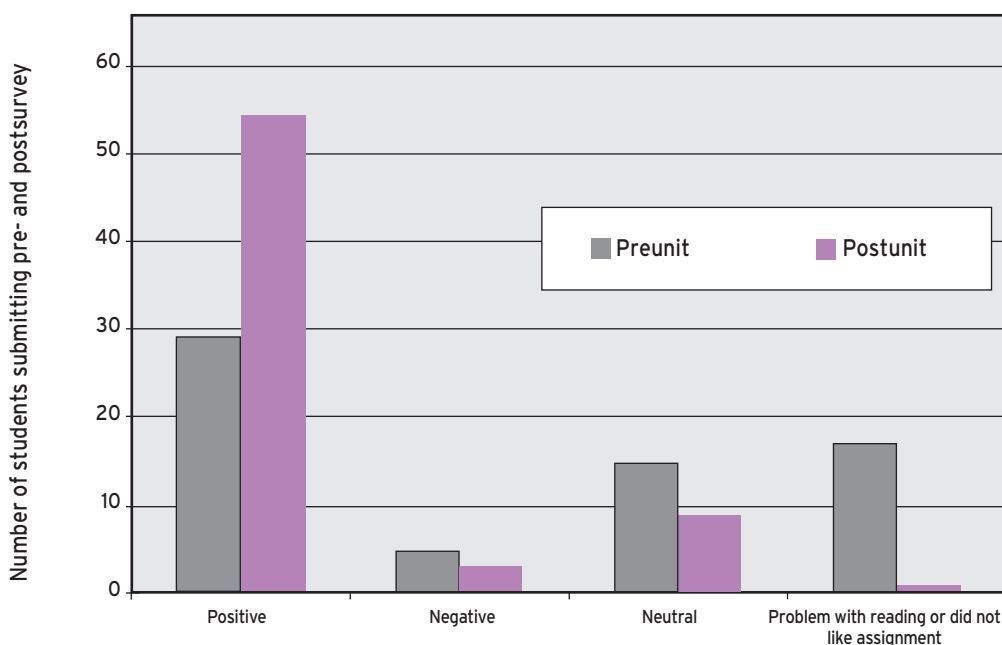
Cultural understanding

Although so many readers liked their books and participated in a virtual experience, they didn't increase in their understanding of others. When writing about literature, students reflected thoughtful understanding of characters. When they assumed the identity of a character and wrote in their Dialogue Journals, two thirds of the readers, 50 of 75, were able to feel what it was like to be part of a nondominant group, what Sims (1982) called a unique "world view or culture or sensibility" (p. 13). As an example, note how Sally reflected Jamal's strong attachment to and concern for his family in *Scorpions* as he tried to help his brother, maintain his own credibility with the gang, and not hurt his mother:

My Mama is trying to make enough cash to live on. But it is tough. We live in an apartment with two small bedrooms. But I sleep on the couch.... I don't want to follow in Randy's footsteps but I might have to.... My Mom is very sad about Randy...I have a gun and held it on Dwayne...he told the police so now I am in deep shi* [sic] too. I don't want to hurt Mama though.

In addition, both the Book Club Organizer (76%) and the Dialogue Journal (73%) indicated that the students recognized that characters from nondominant cultures operated with a unique

FIGURE 1
Students' responses to reading novels



worldview—a set of underlying cultural assumptions—that affected their decisions, actions, and reactions. For example, both Aaron and Robert noted in their BCOs the influence of family in the decisions of Danny, the Vietnamese American main character in *Shadow of the Dragon*. Aaron explained that Danny tried to keep Sang Le and Kim out of trouble because of his commitment to his family, while Robert noted that Danny tried to keep Sang Le as a friend because of his commitment to family, and he tells police about the attack on Sang Le because he felt he “owed” Sang Le.

However, when the students responded on the postunit survey to questions about people of cultural groups, they did not reflect similar understanding. Here, less than 25% appeared to recognize that people from nondominant cultures operate from underlying cultural assumptions different from their own. Seventy-seven percent did not give any evidence in their assignments that they recognized this fact. The readers appeared to make a clean break as they moved from the world of the literature to real life. For example, before reading *Shadow of the Dragon*, Aaron said in his writing

that he didn’t know the difference between Vietnamese Americans and Chinese Americans, but he knew they “know martial arts, and have beautiful art and live in cramped houses in Japan.” Then he read *Shadow of the Dragon*, in which none of these things are true. He clearly identified the book as taking place in Houston, Texas, and, as noted in the previous paragraph, he recognized the main character’s cultural worldview. After the unit, however, he still said he knew that Vietnamese Americans “don’t have advanced cities [because they are] farmers.”

To determine how readers perceived characters from non-European cultures, evaluators again examined the Book Club Organizer, the Dialogue Journal, and the postunit survey. The results for the BCO and the DJ were again remarkably similar. More than 50% of the students perceived characters from the nondominant cultures to be as free as they were to make decisions and to act. They didn’t perceive societal limitations on people of nondominant groups. Beth, for example, read *Journey of the Sparrows*. She recognized Maria’s illegal immigrant status, but ignored the dire consequences to Maria’s entire

family when she assumed Maria could simply choose to quit: “they went across the border from Mexico...in a crate.... Maria’s boss tried to touch her in bad places so she quit.” Only 30% of dominant-culture readers recognized the situations nondominant characters faced in having to live between two cultures. Five percent of the students were paternalistic and 15% considered the characters as “other,” indicating an us/them perspective: *they* are in gangs, *they* are illegal immigrants, *they* are black.

On the postunit survey, the pattern of these percentages reversed. Only 6% of the readers accorded people from the nondominant culture the same freedom to act as they had themselves, and only 6% recognized that people from nondominant cultures have to deal with two different cultures simultaneously. Thirty-two percent were paternalistic toward people of nondominant cultures, and 50% considered people of nondominant cultures to be “others.”

The perception that Ann’s students had about people of cultures different from their own was complicated by another finding. Although students weren’t specifically asked to address this in their work, it was clear from the assignments of 57 students that 60% of them did not recognize that Korean Americans, Vietnamese Americans, or Chinese Americans were U.S. citizens. They also did not perceive African Americans or Latina/Latino Americans as “American” in the same way they saw themselves as being American. Although raters couldn’t make a confident decision about the other 26 readers, if 60% of these students followed the same pattern, it means that 88% of all the readers in the study failed to understand that people who don’t look like they do are often U.S. citizens—not foreigners.

Even though students were specifically asked on the Book Club Organizer to compare the character’s world and values to their own, few students gave any evidence that they came to a better understanding of their own cultural norms or values (see Table 2), and students’ papers gave little evidence that they

went beyond an aesthetic response to read against the text. The readers in this study did not question or challenge the portrayal of the nondominant peoples in the literature they read. They accepted the portrayal the author provided. In the Book Club Organizer, where one might anticipate this kind of analysis, only 22% of the students (15 of 69) questioned or challenged such a portrayal while 78% (54 of 69) did not. In their Dialogue Journals, where one might expect less analysis, 35% of the students (26 of 73) did question the book while 63% of them (47 of 73) did not question the book in any way. However, of the 60 students who completed both the Book Club Organizer and the Dialogue Journal, only 8% (5) challenged or questioned the way the nondominant cultural group was presented in the novels they read.

Finally, two composite scores were created for each student by combining scores from selected questions on the Evaluation Instrument: one to reflect the student’s aesthetic response (Table 3) and one to reflect the student’s cultural understanding at the end of the unit (Table 4). The scores were compared to determine whether there was a correlation between aesthetic response and cultural understanding—that is, whether students with high scores for aesthetic response also had high scores for cultural understanding. The Pearson Correlation Coefficient was determined for each assignment separately and for the three assignments combined (total score for understanding). All of the correlations were statistically significant, indicating that a relationship exists between the way students responded aesthetically and their understandings about the cultures reflected in the books, and that the relationship could not have happened by chance. (See Table 5.)

Discussion and implications

Ann’s primary goal was that her students enjoy reading the multicultural novels. She was commit-

TABLE 2
Evidence of students’ increase in understanding of their own norms and values

BCO	DJ	PS	
36.2%	9.3%	3.0%	(a) Yes, did show increased understanding.
60.9%	89.3%	95.6%	(b) No, did not show increased understanding.

ted to incorporating multicultural literature into her curriculum, and she gave students a voice in selecting the literature they would read. In turn, students in this study clearly liked their books and become personally involved in the human experiences reflected in them. This finding is reinforced by an entry in Ann's journal. She wrote, "Two kids came up to me this morning and said their books were the best books they've ever read! Undoubtedly, the most positive part of this unit was the enjoyment the students derived from the novels." Although a causal relationship cannot be claimed, there was a positive relationship between the way students responded aesthetically to the books they read and how much they understood about the culture reflected in that book: Students who responded more strongly also learned more about culture.

Students' preferences for ways of interpreting literature were consistent with Ann's goal that students like reading their books. As they lived through experiences in their novels, the students were more likely to offer personal reactions than to analyze the text as an object. Recognizing this, Ann continually encouraged the students to go beyond personal response by insisting that they support their interpretations with evidence from the text or with other relevant material. However, students' readings of the texts were quite different from her reading. Her students didn't merely absorb the values of a story.

Students' papers gave little evidence that they went beyond an aesthetic response to read against the text. When the ideas offered in the novels conflicted with their own cultural and social experiences, like the readers in Graham's study (1985), Ann's students either rejected the text material or reshaped it, resulting in inconsistencies or illogical conclusions. Responses on the postunit survey indicate that the students considered what they knew to be the way the world really was, and when asked where they got their information, they named parents, television, and *National Geographic* as their primary sources. Students' cultural knowledge clearly influenced their understanding and interpretation of the novels they read, and they tended to hold tightly to attitudes reflective of their own cultural groups. Rather than exploring differences between the students' worldview and the one presented in the text, their responses indicated that readers considered the novels to be exceptions or

TABLE 3
Criteria used to create a composite score for aesthetic response

- The reader felt positively about reading the novel.
- The reader would choose to read another novel with characters who have different backgrounds and histories from his or her own.
- The reader clearly was operating in the story world when writing from the perspective of a character.
- The reader enjoyed the book (only scores for the postunit survey could be used because there was no variation in readers' responses on the Book Club Organizers or the Dialogue Journals; i.e., all students enjoyed the books).

Note. Each item reflects a student's answer to one or more questions on the Evaluation Instrument.

dismissed them as irrelevant rather than possible alternate realities.

The findings of this study indicate that teachers of dominant-culture students need to have their students read much more multicultural literature so that they can gain experience with alternative views of the world. At the same time, however, they need to weigh the curricular emphasis in their classrooms and consider providing additional help for students to develop the practices necessary for critical literacy (Luke, 2000). For one thing, teachers must help students to recognize their assumptions and examine how systems operate to position people and groups of people (Leland, Harste, Ociepka, Lewison, & Vasquez, 1999). In this study, two thirds of the students could write in the voice of a character and three fourths recognized that the actions of nondominant characters were based on unique cultural assumptions, but 88% assumed U.S. citizens were foreigners because of their heritage. Only 12% recognized that Chinese Americans, Korean Americans, Native Americans, or Vietnamese Americans were U.S. citizens. Teachers in any society need to make a clear distinction between characters who are citizens, characters who are immigrants but not citizens, and characters who are citizens of other countries. Teachers also need to discuss how the struggles of these groups differ in literature and in society. In the United States, for example, teachers can reinforce the fact that the U.S. citizens commonly identified by ethnicity (e.g.,

TABLE 4
Criteria used to create a composite score for cultural understanding

- The reader appeared to recognize that the actions and reactions of the primary character(s) from the nondominant cultures emanated from a worldview different from that of the dominant culture.
- The reader recognized that the nondominant-culture character needed to operate with two different sets of cultural expectations simultaneously.
- The reader did not generalize from the nondominant characters in the book to all members of the characters' cultural group, unless asked to do so in the assignment.
- The reader's conscious or unconscious learning about the nondominant culture reflected in the book tended toward a realistic understanding rather than a stereotypical one.
- The reader consciously recognized the norms and values of a culture different from his or her own.
- The reader recognized unique characteristics such as family patterns and responsibilities, age and gender expectations, or the role of religion as aspects of particular cultures.
- The reader understood, implicitly or explicitly, the effect ethnicity had on the lives of the characters from the nondominant cultures.
- The reader, when writing from the perspective of a character from a nondominant culture, revealed the character's struggles, motivations, and actions that occurred because of the character's culture.
- The reader's responses on the postunit survey appear to reflect the nondominant culture accurately.
- The reader's responses on the postunit survey are different from responses on the preunit survey, appearing to reflect the nondominant culture more accurately.
- The reader acknowledges variation within the nondominant cultural group.
- The reader's conscious or unconscious learning about the nondominant culture appears to have become more realistic on the postunit survey than it was on the preunit survey.

Note. Each item reflects a student's answer to one or more questions on the Evaluation Instrument.

Chinese American, Vietnamese American) are still U.S. citizens and that all U.S. citizens, regardless of heritage, have the same rights.

Teachers need to help students recognize the ways texts position readers in relation to power and society. Readers in this study did not question or challenge the portrayal of the nondominant peoples in the literature they read. Because multicultural literature is more a pedagogical term than a literary one, Ann's decisions about the titles she selected for this unit reflected what Cai (1992) called "the lack of a unified definition [that] reflects conceptual confusion in this field...[where multicultural books] range from translations from other countries to literature about different ethnic groups in the United States" (p. 3). She intentionally chose novels that reflected a variety of categories: books set within the United States; books set in countries outside the United States; books about nonimmigrants, recent immigrants, and second-generation citizens; historical fiction; and realistic fiction. Although Ann's intent was to involve her students in reading about characters involved in a variety of dominant and

nondominant power situations, it is possible that the specific genres read, the citizen/noncitizen issues in the novels, or the fact that all of the main characters were not of Western heritage contributed to the students' tendency to see people of nondominant cultures as "other." Whatever the reason, readers accepted the portrayal the author provided.

Teachers also need to help students cope with the issues involved with authorship. Ann selected books written by authors both inside and outside the cultures about which they were writing. As the unit progressed, she came to realize that her students needed much more experience with books written from perspectives different from their own. They needed to recognize that authors differ in their cultural experiences, their cultural loyalties, and their norms and values. Some write from within a culture, and some write from the outside. Different authors will embed different cultural details in the narrative, the description, the settings, and the dialogue. Reading books written by authors from nondominant cultures is likely to bring readers face to face with discrepancies between their

TABLE 5
Relationship between aesthetic response and cultural understanding

Assignments	Relationship between students' aesthetic response and their understanding of the culture, represented as a correlation coefficient (<i>r</i>)	Level of significance
Book Club Organizer	.34	.0052
Dialogue Journal	.25	.0322
Postunit survey	.33	.0065
Total score for understanding	.59	< .0001

assumptions and the worldview reflected in the text, particularly if readers are encouraged to recognize the differences.

Teachers need to discourage students from identifying with characters if this really means recreating characters in their own images. Instead, we need to help students understand that while characters and people are individually unique, each is also part of a cultural group, and membership in that group often determines their opportunities or lack thereof. Teachers and students can work together to understand the ways texts define the world and to discuss the effect of such ideology on their own readings of the world. For example, they can identify characters and people who do not have the same opportunities within existing systems as dominant-culture characters or dominant-culture readers do simply because of their membership in a nondominant cultural group. They can discuss the reality of living in particular societies as a member of a nondominant culture. They can identify stereotypes of dominant and nondominant cultures and then discuss how such stereotypes developed; whose interests they serve; how they are situated within the texts' power structure themselves; and what agency they have in similar real-world situations.

As teachers, we need to learn—and help our students to learn—about differing worldviews. Bishop (1997) noted that educators have assumed that dominant-culture readers will learn to value people, accept differences, and celebrate cultural pluralism by finding their own connections to literature about people from nondominant groups. For the readers in this study, it was clear that being able to live within a story world did not necessarily transfer to life in the real world. Unless we learn how people of different cultures see the world

through their own eyes, we tend to turn cultural characteristics into stereotypes. We need to understand how unique characteristics of different cultures play out in the lives of real people in those cultures. This could be done by providing opportunities for students to interact personally with people of various cultural backgrounds and by using oral and written materials that reflect the perspective of people inside the culture. Authentic films and videos are useful in demonstrating what it's like to grow up as a member of a nondominant culture, and many authors, professional organizations, and cultural groups have websites. Dialogue with children of different social and ethnic groups, either in person or online, can provide valuable interaction.

As teachers, we can stimulate discussions that bring students face to face with the present day ramifications of values inherent in systems and how they privilege particular groups of people. With students, we can explore other ways of organizing systems using different value positions. Teachers and students can also make an effort as simple as not using the passive voice when talking about issues like racism, gender issues, economic discrimination, or ageism to avoid indicating responsibility for actions. It is also important that teachers not abdicate their own responsibility to be part of the conversation. Unless the teacher takes an active role, students whose voices dominate in the classroom will control the negotiations about the meaning of difference, and alternative voices won't be part of the conversation.

Teachers need to recognize the vital role they play within their classroom curriculum. In an extensive review of research literature about response to and understanding of multicultural literature, the

role of the teacher emerges as a crucial one. In the United States, teachers—who are predominantly white—prefer to see society as a melting pot, focusing on the similarities and ignoring the different or distinct features of varying cultures. In this study, the teacher may inadvertently have contributed to her students' cultural bias in several ways. While Ann certainly didn't subscribe to the melting pot theory, she usually played the role of the interpretive authority in her classroom. During this unit, she changed her normal pattern of instruction to follow what she had been taught was best practice. Because students weren't accustomed to seeing themselves as equal participants in interpreting what they read, a void was created when Ann stepped out of the role of authority, and that void was filled by the voices of the students who dominated the book clubs. Even though the students worked together on the assignments, Ann said in her journal that they "needed more help than [she] was able to give them to go beyond the factual events of the novel to think about what their significance might be." In some instances, the students' completed Book Club Organizers were so similar that it appeared that "the negotiations of the meaning of difference [were] left to those children whose cultural references and perspectives [were] most understood and valued within the classroom" (Enciso, 1997, p. 38)—or at least in the book clubs. As Graham (1985) suggested, Ann's students needed "carefully guided discussions of texts, not to direct students toward a single approved reading, but to invite them to examine their otherwise unchallenged assumptions" (p. 165). When readers share their responses and listen to the responses of others, they learn that different readers make different meanings from the same text. As they compare their understanding with the written text, they come to see that some understandings are more defensible within the context of the story than others. As readers come to understand why they respond as they do and what triggers those responses, they gain the perspective needed for a fuller and sounder personal response. Teachers need to insist that all readers provide support for their interpretations, either from the text or other relevant material.

Teachers need to see themselves as colearners with their students. They need to accept that they will often be unable to provide as much specific, accurate information as their students need and that

their own cultural and social experiences will sometimes overshadow their academic knowledge. For example, the teacher in this study was horrified when she recognized that the question on the pre-unit survey about people of Chinese background reflected a dominant-culture assumption about the "sameness" of Asian peoples. Ann knew the main character in the book to which the question referred was Korean American, not Chinese American, but unconsciously reverted to long-standing dominant-cultural assumptions. Her open-mindedness in sharing her discovery provided a powerful model for her students of how one's cultural assumptions shape one's experience with literature.

Teachers need to talk about literature from the perspective of insiders rather than outsiders. In the description of the novels Ann provided her students, she focused primarily on the plot, making an inadvertent but strong connection between the culture reflected in the book and the problems faced by the main characters. For example, she described *Scorpions* as a "story of a black guy who lives on the streets in New York City. He struggles with family problems, poverty, gangs, and violence." By highlighting the cultural strengths of characters instead, teachers can avoid reinforcing stereotypical aspects readers are conditioned to expect. For example, Jamal shares characteristics commonly found in literature written by African American authors. He struggles against overwhelming odds, helps his mother, is committed to his best friend, and has the unwavering support of a strong mother and grandmother.

Teachers can work to develop a critical literacy curriculum rather than multicultural units. In her journal, Ann noted that the next time she teaches this unit, she will provide more background and preparation for the students before they read. She might think about arranging cultural experiences throughout the year to engage students in considering alternative perspectives. Working within 50-minute class periods is constricting, but Ann already approaches other experiences as cultural artifacts; perhaps she could do so more systematically, which would help students to better understand particular cultures when they meet them in literature and when they meet them in real life. Most of all, Ann said,

I will spend a lot of time in the beginning—the first week—dealing with tough questions of culture, cultural dominance, stereotypes, power differentials between different cultural groups, cultural privilege, and cultural authenticity of the novels. My hope is that students will then read their novels as more than entertaining stories about people who are different from them; ideally, they would read them with a more critical eye, an awareness of how the novel represents the cultural group, a greater understanding of how their attitudes and beliefs are affected by what they read, and more respect for different cultural norms.

Finally, like Naidoo (1992) and Ann, teachers need to recognize that their role as a teacher is a difficult one. They need to both support and challenge their students. In order to help students recognize that some responses are cultural and systematic rather than personal or behavioral, they need to model their own struggles to recognize how their ideological stances affect their readings of the literature. At the same time, they need to refrain from being dogmatic or favoring a particular set of values and to engage students, instead, in discussing a wide range of possible value positions. In essence, they need to continue to learn with their students. When Ann had finished teaching the unit, she wrote,

the teacher's relationship with the students and helping them to expand their thinking are the most important goals. That is more important than getting them to believe that racism is wrong. Each of us is racist to some degree or another. If we reject students because they do not think like we do, we are reinforcing their right to reject the particular culture we want them to understand and accept. If changing students' thinking to be more like yours is more important to you than challenging and expanding their thinking, you should not teach multicultural literature.

The students in this study were fortunate to have a teacher who cared about them, who loved literature, and who was committed to making the world a better one. However, the message that emerges is still a bittersweet one. The findings echo those of Zimet (1976) who concluded, "Both personal testimony and empirical research strongly suggest that while our attitudes, values and behaviours may be influenced by what we read, when left to our own initiative *we read what we are*" (italics in the original; p.17). Zimet continued to say, however, that it is possible to modify attitudes and be-

havior so that readers learn from what they read. She argued that the circumstances under which the reading is done—including the teacher, the classroom, school, and community environment—will determine whether the reader or the material read will have the greatest effect. It is up to each of us to learn from Ann's story how we can more effectively enable our readers to read multicultural literature and to hear the voice that Cai (1992) called, "the voice coming from the heart" (p. 26).

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